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Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Twentieth Century

Juan Cole

*I*raq and Israel/Palestine may on the surface appear to be very different societies with little in common. Iraq has its Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shiites, and its modern history has been a struggle over monarchy, republicanism, and the one-party state. Israel and Palestine are Jewish, Sunni Arab, and Christian Arab, and their central struggle has been over the shape of the Zionist state and the question of Palestinian statelessness. Iraq is a hydrocarbon state, while Israel and Palestine have diverse economies. The two can fruitfully be viewed through the same prism in two ways, however. On a comparative level, they share much in common, being multi-ethnic states with a background in Ottoman and British colonial administrative practices. Their fragility and ethnic instability have driven both internal civil wars and wars with neighbors. They have also had an important impact upon one another. The rise of Zionism in the Middle East and the Arab rejection of it robbed Iraq of its vibrant and influential Jewish community, with fateful results. It also displaced thousands of Palestinians to Iraq and hundreds of thousands to neighboring Kuwait. Iraqi troops fought Israel, with Iraq supporting its Palestinian foes. The Palestinians of Kuwait were further displaced by the Gulf War, and those of Iraq had to flee to Jordan and Palestine after 2003. The Israel lobby in the United States was one important mover in fomenting the 2003 U.S. overthrow of the Iraqi government, which propelled Iraq into chaos.

Iraq as a modern state was created by much the same processes that brought into being Israel and Palestine.¹ In the 19th century, both Iraq

and Israel/Palestine consisted of a set of Ottoman administrative districts. Both were conquered by the British military during World War I, after the Ottoman sultan threw in with Germany and Austria and declared war on the French, British, and Russian empires. Both were cobbled together into a colonial apparatus first administered by the British army, then reorganized as a League of Nations Mandate. British colonial policies of ethnic favoritism and divide-and-rule benefited the Sunni Arabs of Iraq and the Zionist settlers of Palestine. These policies arguably had a very long-term impact in setting the stage for protracted civil wars, sometimes latent and sometimes hot, in both societies. Both illustrate the ways in which European colonialism profoundly shaped the modern Middle East, imposing the state frameworks within which ethnic competition was worked out. They also demonstrate how central the Israeli-Arab conflict has been to the fortunes of Middle Eastern governments.

The British made two promises during World War I, with tragic consequences for the Middle East. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 pledged to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine, which, the pompous commitment intoned, would miraculously avoid inconveniencing what were to be more than a million native inhabitants by the time the promise was fulfilled. A year earlier, the British Arab Bureau in Cairo had given Sharif Husayn, a Hashemite of Mecca, the impression that the British would support an Arab kingdom if the Arabs went into revolt against the Ottoman Empire. At around the same time, the Foreign Office in London was giving away Jerusalem to the Russians and greater Syria to the French, while envisaging British dominance of Iraq and the rest of Palestine. Lenin came to power in Russia and published the salacious details of the secret plot, pulling the new Soviet state out of it. The British on the ground were embarrassed about the double dealings, and connived at allowing the Arab forces, led by Abdullah's son Faysal, to reach Damascus before the British as they pushed the Ottoman forces back. Faysal initially claimed Syria, but when France invaded to claim its prize, Britain bestowed Iraq on Faysal in recompense, making him king in Baghdad. His brother, Abdullah, was awarded the Transjordan by the British, who kept the West Bank and geographical Palestine for their Mandate. Both Faysal and Abdullah were scions of the House of the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, claiming a lineage that went back to Hashem b. Manaf, his great-grandfather. They were thus referred to as "Hashemites."

King Abdullah in Jordan and Faysal and his descendants in Iraq continued to dream of an Arab kingdom greater than the ones they possessed. They plotted to expand their realms when, as they foresaw must happen, the European Mandates drew to a close. Iraqi leaders hoped to pick up Kuwait and Palestine when the British left, and Syria upon the French departure. Abdullah in Jordan had his eye on Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. The Hashemites therefore found the British plan to give away Palestine to Central and Eastern European Zionist settlers extremely inconvenient. In Iraq, Faysal (d. 1933), his successor King Ghazi (d. 1939), and the latter's successor, the regent Prince Abd al-Ilah (d. 1958), all took a strong stand against Jewish immigration into British Palestine and the potential displacement of the Palestinians it threatened to provoke. Iraqi Pan-Arabists felt more strongly about this issue than did the politicians with a strictly Iraqi nationalist orientation. Typical Pan-Arab policy on this issue was outlined in interviews with the Egyptian press by Prime Minister Jamil Midfa'i in 1937, when he said, "Palestine is a part of Arabia and we cannot agree to its being detached therefrom. We shall make every effort to see that the rights of our Palestinian brethren are upheld."² Iraq sent arms and money to Palestinians during the 1936–1939 revolt. It also sent delegations to diplomatic conferences on the future of Palestine, where it pressed this line. Iraq had a further interest in the disposition of Palestine because of the oil pipeline to Haifa, opened in 1935.³

Iraq not only had a policy toward Palestine, it had its own significant Jewish community, estimated at a third of Baghdad's population. Iraqi Jews until the 1940s were for the most part uninterested in Zionism, and instead considered themselves Arabs of Jewish heritage.⁴ Labor Zionism, with its emphasis on Jewish nationalism, socialism, and agricultural labor, developed in response to discrimination against Jews in Poland and Russia, where they were frequently forced into professions like peddling because they were forbidden to own much in the way of real estate. Baghdad's Jewish artisans, merchants, shopkeepers, and intellectuals had little interest in farm life, and many of those interested in socialism, from 1936, gravitated to the Communist Party of Iraq with other Iraqi leftists. Although Iraqi Jews faced occasional discrimination, and a quota was instituted in the 1930s setting the proportion of places they could take in the bureaucracy and schools, in interviews and as writers they expressed fulfillment as citizens of Iraq.

It is sometimes alleged that German anti-Semitism had an impact on places like Egypt and Iraq in the 1930s. While some Iraqis were will-

ing to seek political alliances with Axis powers on a pragmatic basis, there is no solid evidence for the charge of ideological influence in contemporary mainstream newspapers or diplomatic accounts.⁵ British Ambassador to Iraq Basil Newton observed in 1940 that with respect to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of Alliance of 1930, the Nuri al-Said government, although it did not go so far as to declare war on Germany in September of 1939, “did at once take all the measures (such as breaking off diplomatic and trade relations with Germany, interning German nationals and guarding the essential lines of communications) which they were obliged to take if they were to fulfill the obligations of the treaty.”⁶ He observed that the main reasons for Baghdad’s reluctance to declare war were a fear that the country’s military was unprepared and an anxiety about being seen as a British satellite regime at a time when tensions were high over the Palestine issue. The idea of Iraqi tribal levies being sent to fight Germans on behalf of Britain also risked provoking unrest among the tribes of southern Iraq. Newton said that the German invasion of Poland produced widespread “revulsion,” and added, “While not losing sight of their former conception of the Arabs chafing under the ‘tutelage’ of the great Western democracies, the Iraqis have recognised quite clearly the definite menace of Hitlerism and are anxious to see it defeated, although they hope that Britain and France may find it expedient, during or as a result of the war, to accord full independence and self-determination to the Arabs of Palestine and Syria.”⁷

To the extent that Muslim and Christian Arabs grew suspicious of Jews in the late 1930s, the misgivings were fuelled by the 1936–1939 Palestinian revolt against the British policy of facilitating further Jewish immigration. Anti-colonialism, nationalism, and the Palestine issue came together in the minds of many in the Iraqi public. When Iraq’s King Ghazi died in an automobile accident on April 4, 1939, a crowd in the northern city of Mosul burned the British consulate and murdered the consul, convinced that the monarch’s death had been plotted in London. The new consul, C.G. Summerhayes, reported to Baghdad that, “this town has an awkward population and the feeling is not generally friendly, owing mainly to propaganda about Palestine.” He was convinced that the activities of the local “Palestine Defence League” had had a “cumulative” impact.⁸

In 1940, the nationalist Rashid Ali Gaylani became prime minister for a second time. During that year, he continued the boycott of Nazi Germany and was said to have paid "some heed to the lessons about internal treachery taught by Norway and the Netherlands."⁹ Gaylani, however, declined to allow British troops to cross Iraqi territory for war purposes and refused to act against fascist Italy when it declared war on Britain that year, adopting a new slogan of neutrality. In summer 1940, Gaylani and his clique sent a cabinet minister to contact German Ambassador to Turkey Franz von Papen.¹⁰ The staunchly pro-British Nuri al-Said, however, had attempted to contact Germany for similar reasons in the spring of 1940, seeking guarantees of Iraqi independence before he had to step down, so the Gaylani policy was no departure.¹¹ Late in 1940, Gaylani and his supporters were intrigued by Hitler's pledge to preserve the independence of the Arab states and to end the British and French colonial regimes in Palestine and Syria, respectively. Arab nationalists who pursued such links with the fascist states were not typically influenced by fascist ideas, about which they remained largely ignorant. They simply sought another Great Power that could check the British. Nuri al-Said, still in the cabinet and committed to the alliance with Britain, was appalled by these moves and worked with the British and pro-British Iraqi politicians to undermine Gaylani, unseating him on January 31, 1941, in favor of Taha al-Hashimi. Al-Hashimi proved no more willing to cut off ties with Mussolini's Italy than had Gaylani, suggesting that the attempt to maintain a modicum of neutrality was a shared goal among top Iraqi politicians, with the possible exception of Nuri al-Said.

In April, Gaylani and his supporters in the Iraqi military effected a coup and forced the regent, Abd al-Ilah, into exile. Although the British charged Gaylani with Axis sympathies, his government reaffirmed the 1930 treaty with Britain and simply pursued neutrality (that Gaylani sought German and Italian weaponry so as to escape complete dependence on Britain was consistent with that quest for neutrality). It is natural that to a government such as Churchill's, locked in a deadly struggle with a powerful enemy, Iraqi neutrality would have appeared like an active alliance with Germany. Yet it is odd that subsequent historians have seldom escaped from the vocabulary of wartime propaganda. Many even speak of Gaylani as "pro-Nazi," which is certainly incorrect during this period.

Turkey and Yemen, not to mention the United States, also maintained neutrality with regard to the Axis. Switzerland, while neutral,

actually allowed the sale of arms to Germany, so it seems a little unfair that the Swiss Federal Council of the time should be lauded for pluck in its resistance to Germany while Gaylani is demonized. Sweden, also neutral, was part of the Nazi economic system until 1943 in a way the Iraqi coup-makers appear not even to have dreamed about. Gaylani insisted that his coup was a domestic political movement with no implications for foreign policy. In spring of 1941, he sought formal recognition from Britain and allowed transit of some British troops to Palestine from Basra, hardly the actions of an Axis ally.¹² As a nationalist, he did attempt to curb Britain's military freedom of movement in Iraq, including at the Royal Air Force base at Habbaniyyah. Germany dithered in the face of Iraqi pleas for arms, and the Vichy government initially showed little enthusiasm for allowing Syria to be used to transship weaponry.¹³

Far from the April 1941 coup telling us anything about Iraqi public opinion, the British ambassador observed that, "In most *liwas* [provinces], except Diwaniya and Kerbala, the tribal attitude is generally one of indifference."¹⁴ Some in the educated classes decried the coup as unconstitutional: "The Shiah divines of the Holy Cities have so far refused to declare in favor of the new regime." That is, from an informed British perspective, the Rashid Ali government was not greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm by the Iraqi populace or the religious authorities.

In May 1941, Churchill sent British forces to invade Iraq and restore the regent. At this point, Iraqi politicians and officers sought German help with more urgency, and the Vichy government agreed, too late, to the use of Syria for logistics. The British quickly deposed the Iraqi government. Rashid Ali took refuge in Germany, placing himself at its disposal, but it would be anachronistic to read back his later desperation as an exile into his actions while still in Iraq. At the end of the war, he fled to Saudi Arabia.

On Emir Abd al-Ilah's return to the capital on June 1, delegations of monarchist Iraqis paid their respects, including a group from the Jewish community. Rumors flew in Baghdad that Iraqi Jews had colluded with Britain to overthrow the Iraqi government, and nationalist mobs attacked them. Some 200 were killed, hundreds wounded, and three million dollars in property damage was inflicted over two days of rioting. Iraqi troops intervened, and the British ambassador estimated that they killed as many of the rioters as the latter did of Jews. A military tribunal swiftly tried and meted out severe sentences to some of the ringleaders in the crowd.¹⁵

Although the British and Zionists tended to blame the anti-Jewish action on German propaganda, it is not clear that Berlin ever had much real influence in Iraq. Few Iraqis had radios in those days before the transistor and the literacy rate was low. German ideas would have had difficulty finding a large audience. Certainly, there were not thousands of Baghdadis willing and able to form a crowd on the basis of pro-German sentiment. It is more accurate to see the anti-Jewish riot as an Iraqi protest against being recolonized by the British. Given that the British and the Zionist Jews were joint partners in the colonization of Palestine, the symbolic logic of the crowd saw them as such in Baghdad as well. The attempt to explain Arab frustrations with reference to Nazi pamphleteering, quite aside from being unsupported by compelling evidence and implausible on the face of it, has the unfortunate effect of making it more difficult to see the Middle Eastern context of this Middle Eastern event. Nativist rioting against minorities as a form of anti-colonialism has been common in modern history. The attack, horrible as it was, did not point to a sea change in the situation of Iraqi Jews at that time, which returned to normal under subsequent Iraqi governments through 1948. The pogrom or "*farhud*" of 1941 did, however, impel some Iraqi Jews to take an interest in Zionism. Zionists themselves stepped up attempts to recruit Iraqi Jews to the cause because further Jewish immigration from Europe was blocked after 1940. Most Iraqi Jews, however, remained Iraqi nationalists or joined the Communist Party until much later in that decade.

In the 1940s, King Abdullah of Jordan found a silver lining in the Palestine crisis for his territorial ambitions. In private, he increasingly seemed to accept the idea of partitioning Palestine in hopes that the Palestinians could then be incorporated into the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This stance, and his secret negotiations with Zionist leaders, brought him into bad repute in the newly established Arab League, which instead supported a Palestinian state encompassing all of Palestine. In 1948, Abdullah took a more aggressive stance, apparently hoping to incorporate all of Palestine into Jordan, while allowing for "autonomy for the Jewish parts."¹⁶ Still, a Jordanian eyewitness maintained that he pledged that Jordanian and Iraqi forces would not engage Zionist ones inside the area designated for Israel by the United Nations.¹⁷

Emir Abd al-Ilah of Iraq sent 3,000 Iraqi troops to Jordan to support Abdullah, but despite the Iraqi government's aggressive rhetoric, they stayed in the West Bank and did not attack the Zionist-held territory awarded by the United Nations.¹⁸ Iraq later sent another 10,000 troops

to protect the other Hashemite kingdom, although Abdullah's determination to simply incorporate the West Bank into his realm gradually soured Iraqi politicians on him.

Palestinian villagers around Haifa and Jaffa at first fought encroaching Zionist forces as irregulars, but were defeated and fled to Jenin in the West Bank, where the Iraqi army protected them. Iraq evacuated the women and children to Baghdad, and formed the men into a unit of the Iraqi Army, which they dubbed the Carmel Brigade. When Iraqi forces left for home late in 1948, they brought 4,000 Palestinians of the Carmel Brigade with them.¹⁹

The defeat of the Egyptian forces, the emergence of Israel, the expulsion by Zionist forces of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes, and the dislocations of the war had a profound impact on Iraq. Arab Iraqis sympathized wholeheartedly with the displaced Palestinians. Many Muslim Iraqis blamed Jews in general for the catastrophe, although given the distinct lack of enthusiasm for Zionism characteristic of most Iraqi Jews, this attitude was most unfair.

Beginning in 1947, the government fired some Jewish civil servants and at first put restrictions on their emigration from Iraq, lest they go to Israel and strengthen it. Later on, it rethought this policy, apparently fearing a Zionist fifth column in Mesopotamia. After 1950, attacks on Jews and synagogues proliferated. Leftist Iraqi Jews have charged that some attacks were actually orchestrated by Zionists who hoped to convince Iraqi Jews to emigrate to Israel. The fog of war makes it difficult for a historian to adjudicate such claims, but two points are in order. The first is that the charges are credible and that nationalists have throughout modern history repeatedly deployed such dirty tactics in order to consolidate populations in a compact territory. Iraqi Jewish eyewitnesses of the bombings maintained that Zionists were responsible. The second point is that any such activities by Zionist saboteurs is unlikely to account for the emigration of 120,000 Iraqi Jews from Iraq over three years. Anxiety about government discrimination, the insecurity of Jewish property, and the fear of getting trapped in a hostile Iraq in all likelihood contributed to the panic much more than did a few bombings.²⁰

By 1953, only 10,000 Jews were left in Iraq. Conditions for them improved under the nationalist government of Abdul Karim Qasim from 1958. The loss of most Iraqi Jews warped Iraqi society, depriving it of a key urban population and an important multicultural element. The wealthier Jews in Baghdad had had strong links to the Alliance

Française (dedicated to French public diplomacy) and to international commerce. Jewish intellectuals had made disproportionate contributions to the Iraqi Communist Party. Both bourgeois cosmopolitanism and international socialism in Iraq were weakened.

Kurds and Shiites were largely (though by no means entirely) rural. In the aftermath of Baghdad's transformation into an almost wholly Sunni Muslim city in the 1950s, the literate, urban Sunni middle classes were better able to pursue a Sunni-tinged Arab nationalism of an insular and triumphalist sort.

The orchestrated attack by Britain, France, and Israel on Egypt in 1956 created an irreparable fissure between the Iraqi public and the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, well known for his pro-British sympathies. He had taken Iraq into the anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact with Britain, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan in 1955, at a time when Egypt's charismatic Gamal Abdel Nasser was championing the Non-Aligned Movement and anti-colonialism. The Iraqi government's refusal to come to Egypt's aid was extremely unpopular. In November of 1956, students in Baghdad organized repeated demonstrations, and British Ambassador Sir Michael Wright reported "serious and widespread disquiet."²¹ The Iraq Petroleum Company pipeline through Syria was bombed, harming the government's finances for months and reducing its ability to provide services and keep clients happy. A demonstration in the Shiite holy city of Najaf got out of hand and the police had to call in the army to control the population.²² The consul in the southern port city of Basra revealed that the police had escorted the British in Nasiriyyah out of town, and public showings of British films had been cancelled. He wrote, "The main British crime in the eyes of Basrawis was not that we attacked Egypt, but that we did so seemingly in collusion with, or at least in association with the Jews and the French."²³ He added, "The Jewish attack on Egypt was viewed entirely emotionally and even the most informed and most balanced of Basrawis, some of whom have spent years in England, insist on believing that the Egyptian armies won a great victory." The rise of the transistor radio had allowed Abdel Nasser to broadcast his denunciations of Nuri al-Said directly to the Iraqi public, with powerful effect. British confidence that the Iraqi government could easily contain the minor demonstrations was warranted in 1956. It could be argued, nevertheless, that the Baghdad regime's *de facto* complaisance in the face of British and Israeli aggression on another Arab state, whatever *pro forma* denunciations it may have issued, fatally undermined it.

Events in Iraq perpetually concerned the Israelis because of its demographic weight and the unresolved character of the relationship between the two states. In winter/spring 1958, the Iraqi and Jordanian monarchies explored a union to counter the nationalist union of Egypt and Syria in the United Arab Republic. In response, Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir expressed Tel Aviv's anxiety to the British ambassador. She is said to have told him that, "Israel had no armistice agreement with Iraq; she was now faced with a united army and the prospect of Iraqi troops on her borders."²⁴

The anxiety over a Hashemite union was swiftly replaced by alarm at the July 1958 military coup and popular uprising that violently ended the lives of the Iraqi royal family and Prime Minister Nuri al-Said. The former Iraqi elite's alliance with Britain, enmity with Abdel Nasser, and inaction toward Israel had made it extremely unpopular.

In the event, Abd al-Karim Qasim's regime favored Iraqi, not Pan-Arab, nationalism. It developed a rivalry with Abdel Nasser and focused on internal Iraqi projects such as land reform and urban development, rather than on foreign adventures in the Levant. The Qasim government was ended by a short-lived coup staged by the Arab nationalist Baath Party in 1963. The officers' regime that overthrew the Baath late in 1963, led serially by the brothers Abd al-Salam Arif (until his death in 1966) and then Abd al-Rahman Arif (1966–1968), explored Pan-Arab alliances. Iraq played only a minor role in the Six Day War of 1967, although it sent 25,000 troops to support Jordan. It lost ten men in fighting. In reaction to strong U.S. support for Israel, the American embassy in Baghdad reported, "Following the outbreak of war in the Middle East on June 5, Iraq severed diplomatic relations with the United States, suspended oil shipments, refused to permit U.S. aircraft to overfly Iraq, and announced a boycott of U.S. goods."²⁵ The alarm of the diplomatic personnel in the Iraqi capital at the public mood is apparent in the embassy's report that, "All media continue blare reports of 'tripartite aggression.' American professor checking out Baghdad University today told by girl cashier he lucky to be leaving because 'we're going to kill all of you.'"²⁶ Iraqi Foreign Minister Adnan Pachachi complained with "personal bitterness" to the outgoing U.S. ambassador that, "the Arabs had been misled as to what they could expect from the United States, or they had misled themselves." He recalled the even-handed position taken by the United States during the 1956 war, when Washington "had immediately and forcibly publicly stated that Israel would not be allowed any territorial gains."

The disillusioned foreign minister lamented, "The United States position is so close to that of Israel that there is no meaningful distinction to make."²⁷ It was nearly two decades before diplomatic relations were briefly restored with the United States.

The 1967 war helped push Iraq into international isolation. Iraq refused to accept United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which called for the withdrawal of Israel from occupied Arab lands, vowing instead to pursue the armed struggle.²⁸

The humiliating defeat of the Arab cause enraged the Iraqi public and helped open Arif to a second coup by the Baath Party, in 1968, this time successful. Among the first acts of the Baath government was to hold show trials of former officials and purported conspirators, among whom were nine Iraqi Jews that the regime hanged as alleged spies for Israel in 1969. All but a handful of the remaining Iraqi Jews fled the country. At the same time, a second wave of Palestinian refugees was forced abroad as a result of the Israeli conquest of Gaza and the West Bank in the 1967 war, with Iraq's Palestinian population swelling to some 34,000. Unlike their compatriots in Jordan, they remained stateless and most never gained Iraqi citizenship. In neighboring Kuwait, the Palestinian population burgeoned to 400,000 by 1989.

The Baath regime engaged in a highly symbolic and "demonstrative" brand of diplomacy and had predictably bad relations with Israel.²⁹ Frustration with American and European partisanship and military support for Israel was given as one source of public pressure on the Iraqi government to nationalize the Iraqi petroleum industry, thus punishing Royal Dutch Shell and the American majors Standard Oil (later Exxon) and Mobil.³⁰ President Ahmad Hasan Bakr nationalized this key resource in 1972. Iraq sent troops to support Syria during the 1973 war, and a force of 30,000 Iraqi troops stopped the Israelis from advancing from the Golan Heights further into Syrian territory. Baghdad aided Palestinian guerrillas, as well. Iraq and Israel, as two major Middle Eastern states, kept a wary eye on each other's military capabilities. Secretly aided by Britain and France, and with help from spies in the nuclear sector in the U.S., Israel had used a heavy water reactor at Dimona to produce atomic weapons by the early 1970s, thus impelling other Middle East states to develop at least some nuclear expertise.

The oil price surge of the 1970s began to turn Baathist Iraq into a regional power. The price of petroleum quadrupled over the decade, giving Iraq a staggering income of some \$29 billion a year by 1980 (up from \$575 million in 1972³¹). Most of the Gulf Arab oil states had tiny populations and were forced to recycle their petrodollars into Western investments, as their economies lacked the absorptive capacity to put those vast sums of money to work locally. In contrast, Iraq had a relatively large population and possessed enough of a literate, skilled workforce to use the income from fossil fuels for the establishment of petrochemical, pharmaceutical, and other factories. With Egypt expelled from the Arab League because of its 1978 peace treaty with Israel, the steadfastly rejectionist Iraq was in a position to emerge as a leader of the Arab world and even, potentially, of the Non-Aligned Movement. A rhetorical hard line against Israel was important to Baghdad's bid for increased stature, championed after his 1979 internal coup by Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti.

With its vastly increased petroleum wealth, the Iraqi government pursued a myriad of modernization projects in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the building of a civilian nuclear power plant, known as Osirak, with French help. Although the Iraqi government implored Paris for a heavy water reactor, the French adamantly refused and insisted on building only a light water reactor. (Light water reactors cannot be directly used to generate fissionable material, unlike heavy water reactors.) Paris had also rejected Iraqi requests for a plutonium reprocessing facility, and without a reprocessing capacity, spent fuel from a light water reactor cannot be turned into a nuclear weapon.

Iraq was a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and it allowed regular International Atomic Energy Agency inspections. Even though Osirak posed no security threat to Israel, Zionist leaders appear to have viewed it as a symbolic challenge as the first Arab reactor, and they were determined to keep Israel the sole nuclear state in the region. In 1981, before the nuclear plant could "go hot," the Israeli air force bombed it. In response, Saddam Hussein launched a crash program to construct a nuclear warhead in the 1980s.³² While the secret post-Osirak program did violate the NPT, it was by most accounts a failure. United Nations inspectors discovered and dismantled the remnants of the program in 1992, after Iraq lost the Gulf War. Israel, then, formed an absolute limit to the extent of Iraqi modernity. The Israeli challenge, along with the Iranian one, lay behind Saddam Hussein's pursuit of unconventional weapons in the 1980s, which ulti-

mately fueled the suspicions that allowed the George W. Bush administration to overthrow him.

Israeli concerns about the growing power of Iraq as an Arab, pro-Palestinian hydrocarbon state drove Israel to take Iran's side in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988. Israel had been dependent upon Iranian petroleum during the time of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlevi, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution that brought Imam Ruhollah Khomeini to power threatened an important Israeli fuel source. The Islamic Republic of Iran, however, also faced a problem. The revolution and the hostage crisis had led to bad relations between Tehran and Washington, and to an American boycott of Iran. Yet many of Iran's best weapons had been supplied by the United States, creating a crisis of spare parts. Israel covertly offered Tehran American spare parts from its own arsenal in return for Iranian petroleum.

Some Israeli government officials regretted that from late 1983, the Reagan administration had sided with Iraq rather than Iran. One way they offset this American policy and managed to arrange for some U.S. help to Iran as well was to broker the Iran-Contra deal with the Reagan White House. Pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Lebanon had taken a number of Americans hostage, creating a public relations problem for Reagan, who had criticized former President Jimmy Carter's impotence in the face of Iran's hostage taking. The White House had also been blocked by the congressional Boland Amendment from using government funding to support right-wing guerrillas in Central America. At the same time, Iran needed weapons to prosecute the war with Iraq. Although the U.S. was backing Iraq, the Reagan administration agreed to sell Tehran anti-aircraft and other weapons off the books, essentially stealing them from Pentagon warehouses. The money Khomeini paid to the U.S. for these weapons was then funneled to the U.S.-backed guerrillas in Central America. The Iranians also used their good offices to free American hostages in Lebanon.³³ The plot, despite its Machiavellian elegance, backfired when it became public.

The Iran-Iraq War left the Baath regime in Iraq deeply indebted and the collapse of the Eastern bloc left it without a powerful patron. Iraq was now lacking in the resources to realize Saddam Hussein's ambition to become a regional great power. His search for new resources, among other motivations, led to his invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990. This aggression by one Arab League member against another had nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli struggle, but did become wrought up with it willy-nilly. Saddam Hussein was dismayed that the

Arab League condemned him for the invasion. Even old friends like Hosni Mubarak of Egypt joined with the Americans and the Saudis in announcing a determination to push him back out of Kuwait. He wanted to drive a wedge between the American-led coalition and the Arab states, reversing the rush of Egypt and Syria to provide troops for the war effort against him. He knew that if he could bring the Israelis into the war against him, the Arab regimes might be forced by public opinion to withdraw from the fray lest they be seen as allies of Tel Aviv against another Arab state. Saddam therefore ordered SCUD missile attacks on Israel.³⁴ The Israeli public, afraid of being gassed, conducted drills and some wore gas masks in public. The Israeli Philharmonic even played in gas masks. Although Saddam had chemical and biological weapons stores, he simply put dumb bombs into the warheads, although rumors sometimes flew in Israel that they contained nerve gas. If his goal were to provoke an Israeli attack on Iraq, rather than to accomplish any genuine military objective in Israel itself, dumb bombs would do the trick. The Israelis at points seemed poised to enter the war, but were dissuaded by strong-arming from the Bush administration. Bush thereby kept his coalition together and was able to arrange for Egyptian troops to be the ones who entered Kuwait City first, making for a positive image in the Arab world.

The SCUD attacks raised to a fever pitch anxiety about personal safety among Israelis. Such attacks, even though they did little real damage, became an element in the demographic warfare between Israelis and Palestinians. Since Israelis can easily emigrate to Western Europe and the United States, Israeli leaders are perpetually concerned about security threats that might provoke substantial out-migration or might discourage further in-migration. To calm the nerves of the Israeli public, Bush Sr. provided Patriot anti-missile missiles to Israel, which, while of limited utility, in fact did have a positive psychological effect.³⁵

The Gulf War had two major impacts on the Arab-Israeli question beyond the SCUD attacks. Before the invasion, Saddam Hussein had pledged a strong stance against Israel. As a result, the PLO leadership and the Palestinian public in the Levant largely rallied to the side of Iraq, as had huge North African crowds. In Kuwait, the attitudes were markedly different, since 200,000 Palestinians fled Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation, with some joining the underground resistance to Baghdad (the Iraqis imprisoned 5,000 Palestinians for opposing them). After the expulsion of the Iraqi army from Kuwait, the Kuwaiti

government accused the Palestinians of collaborating with Baghdad during the occupation, tarring all with the same brush. Of Kuwait's population of about 1.2 million, half were non-citizen guest workers, and the majority of those (400,000) were Palestinians. They had constituted about a third of the population. In March 1991, those remaining were forced out. Some 300,000 of these Palestinians went to Jordan, while about 30,000 went to the West Bank. (Most had originated in the West Bank or Israel, but they preferred living in Jordan to living under Israeli military occupation.) The Palestinian exodus from the Gulf substantially weakened the PLO, to which their contributions had been important.³⁶

The other major impact of the Gulf War on Arab-Israeli affairs was that the Bush Sr. administration took advantage of the victory and the positive feelings toward the U.S. in the region to push for a comprehensive peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Secretary of State James Baker campaigned for the Madrid peace conference in fall of 1991, and then worked to unseat the Likud government of Shamir, which he viewed as expansionist and unhelpful.³⁷ The Oslo peace process and the creation of the Palestinian Authority thus owed a great deal to the Gulf War's impact on the Palestinians, with their loss of remittances from Kuwait probably making them more willing to compromise, and American prestige from the victory helping to convince Israelis to unseat the Likud.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 had some connection to the Arab-Israeli conflict, although the precise weight that should be given to that connection is in dispute.³⁸ The Neoconservatives, made up primarily (though not exclusively) of Jewish-American politicians and policy-makers who had moved to the right in the 1980s, had argued forcefully for regime change in Iraq since mid-decade. Neoconservative figures like Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, and David Wurmser broached the desirability of a war to overthrow the Baath regime in Iraq in a White Paper they wrote for far right-wing Israeli politician Binyamin Netanyahu in 1996.³⁹ They argued for reviving the Hashemite monarchy as a means to undermine and overthrow the Baath regime in Syria. They also expressed the hope that the restored Hashemite king, as a Sayyid (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), would have moral authority among the Shiites of southern Lebanon and so could curb the popularity of the Khomeinist Hizbullah party. These prescriptions were a fantasy and impractical, but they did signal a new determination among some of the more militant Israel lobbies to push for a dramatic

change in the geopolitics of the Middle East by promoting regime change in Iraq. Because of the Iraqi Baath's aggressive invasions of Iran and Kuwait, its massive political repression of Kurds and Shiites, its violations of the NPT, and a series of United Nations Security Council condemnations, it was the weakest of the Arab states confronting Israel and the easiest regime in the region to overthrow.

The Neoconservative Project for the New American Century (PNAC), established in 1997 by William Kristol and Robert Kagan, involved many of the authors of the "Clean Break" White Paper. It had American military action against Iraq among its primary goals and its supporters pressured the Clinton administration to launch military operations. When George W. Bush came to power in January 2001, he, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld appointed many of the "Clean Break" authors and PNAC members to high positions throughout the Defense and State Departments and in Cheney's vice presidential staff. From these perches inside the Executive, they were able to collude with Iraqi expatriates to manufacture evidence that Saddam Hussein still had an active research program and stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, and that his regime was directly connected to Al-Qaeda.

The Neoconservatives were clearly obsessed with Israeli security. That obsession drove much of their case against Iraq, which was difficult to configure as a genuine threat to the United States. The Israeli public also overwhelmingly approved of the notion of a war on Iraq, and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon denounced Iraq to the Knesset as the biggest danger to the Zionist state. The outbreak of the second Intifada in the fall of 2000, and the support that Saddam Hussein allegedly offered the families of suicide bombers, sharpened Israeli concerns about Baghdad. Israeli radio reported in late 2002 that, "In recent weeks, Iraq has dramatically stepped up its transfer of funds to the territories. Since the beginning of the Intifada, Iraq has transferred tens of millions of dollars to the Palestinians to encourage terrorist attacks."⁴⁰

While the Israel lobbies and Israel itself strongly supported regime change in Baghdad, the effort was spearheaded by Bush and Cheney, both of whom had a background in the U.S. oil industry. Given that the top decision-makers had earlier been at odds with the Israel lobbies over issues such as sanctions on Iran or the expansion of Israeli colo-

nies in the West Bank, their alliance with the Neoconservatives must be seen as an instrumental new development from 2000 onward. Thus, the American attack on Iraq is best understood as deriving from an alliance of U.S. petroleum interests with the Israel lobbies.

The modern history of Iraq has been unusually shaped by foreign interventions, both direct and indirect. As an Arab Muslim country born of the Ottoman experience but midwived by the British Empire, it faced repeated British intervention in its domestic affairs. The Iraqi petroleum industry and Iraq's key strategic position as a route between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf (important to British communications with India until 1947) drove initial British interventions. The British project in Mandate Palestine, of creating a homeland for Jews in a densely populated Arab region, stoked growing passions in Iraq. The betrayal of the Palestinians by the British, as most Iraqis understood it, served as a constant reminder of Western perfidy and a poignant symbol for Iraqis' own resentments at being under London's thumb. The British and the Zionists misunderstood this growing nationalism in Iraq as intertwined with German or fascist influence, for which there is little convincing evidence and which the reports of contemporary British diplomats generally call into question. Rather, Iraqi elites in the late 1930s and early 1940s sought greater autonomy from Britain, including through (somewhat negligible) trade and diplomatic relations with Axis powers. The Iraqi masses sympathized with Palestinians being displaced by the influx of Zionist colonists. The attempt to move toward neutrality among the combatants in World War II was interpreted by British and Zionist observers as a pro-Nazi policy, although evidence for active support for Nazism as an ideology is lacking. The British need for Iraqi petroleum and fear of having an important communications route to India cut off led them to virtually recolonize Iraq in 1941.

The alliance of a powerful section of the Iraqi elite with Britain, exemplified by Emir Abd al-Ilah and sometime Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, became increasingly unpopular in large part because of the events in Israel and Palestine from 1948 forward. The rise of Israel and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes created a backlash against Iraqi Jews that ultimately deprived the country of an important force for multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Baghdad's refusal to intervene on Egypt's side in 1956 contributed powerfully to the discontents that produced the 1958 coup and popular uprising that ended the pro-British monarchy. Likewise, the

limited Iraqi government involvement in the 1967 war and the humiliating defeat inflicted on Arab forces by the Israelis paved the way for the 1968 Baathist coup against the Arif clique. The turn of Iraq from pro-Western monarchy to Iraqi and Arab nationalism was not solely caused by public passions on the Palestine question, but the latter was one important catalyst for this sea change.

From 1968 onward, the Baath government was largely in synchrony with public opinion in Iraq on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and on the question of imperialism. Iraq's nationalization of the oil industry in 1972 and its vigorous participation in the 1973 war on Syria's side bolstered its Arab nationalist credentials. Baath modernization and industrialization drives raised standards of living, and the oil price revolution of the 1970s abruptly made Iraq into a wealthy, rapidly developing regional power. With Egypt neutralized after the 1978 Camp David Accords, Iraq emerged as a leader of the Arab bloc and one of the few military powers that could hope to challenge Israeli hegemony in the Levant. Israel responded to the Iraqi challenge by bombing the Osirak reactor and by forming an alliance of convenience with Iraq's primary enemy, Khomeinist Iran. Despite strident rhetoric on Israel, however, the Baath regime mainly spent blood and treasure on a quest for aggrandizement through the conquest of territories and the acquisition of petroleum resources from its two neighbors, Iran and Kuwait. Whatever support Saddam Hussein may have sometimes given the Palestinians, his reckless invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent expulsion of Palestinians from that country did more to weaken them as a financial and political force than anything since their expulsion from Israel in 1948. Saddam Hussein's decision to fire SCUD missiles at Israel in January 1991, in hopes of drawing Israel into the war against him and thereby breaking up the alliance of the United States and the Arab League against his annexation of Kuwait, may well have sealed his doom. Along with his subsequent financial support for Palestinians, this action convinced the Israel lobbies in the United States and important segments of the Israeli elite and public that Baathist Iraq formed the greatest menace to Israel in the region and that only regime change could ensure the survival of the Zionist state. Baathist threats, backed by missiles that could reach Israel and a record of attempting to develop chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, formed an element in the psychological dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The long shadow cast by Baghdad had the potential to spur Israeli emigration or slow immigration from the former Soviet Union.

Baathist Iraq's financial support for the Palestinians may not only have enabled guerrilla and terrorist attacks but also stiffened Palestinian resolve and made it less likely that Palestinians would leave the West Bank because of economic desperation. While Iraqi involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was only one impetus for the 2003 American war on Iraq, the Israel lobbies played an important role in fomenting the war that opened a new chapter in Iraqi history. Palestine, Iraq, and Israel have been profoundly intertwined in modern history. The idea that "the road to peace in Jerusalem runs through Baghdad," promulgated by the Neoconservatives in early 2003, was among the more profoundly wrong political slogans ever manufactured in history. That regime change, war, and political instability in Iraq have frequently been deeply influenced and sometimes even driven by the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, however, seems irrefragable. ●

Notes

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